

Sarah Horner, *Pioneer Press*

A rescue boat for the Minnesota River Valley, research on a beetle killing ash trees across the state and a therapy pool for children with disabilities are just the beginning.

There's also a program to help Minnesota service members re-enter society after deployment, equipment for St. Paul law enforcement and an electronic medical record system at Bethesda Hospital.

All of these, along with scores of other projects across the eastern metro, were on the losing end when the U.S. Congress - in an effort to reduce the deficit - decided earlier this year to ban federal earmarks through 2012, according to 2011 earmark requests reviewed by the Pioneer Press.

The decision killed what could have been more than \$200 million in what is often referred to as federally targeted "earmark" spending for some 120 projects in the east metro - Dakota, Anoka, Washington and Ramsey counties as well as the University of Minnesota - documents indicate.

Though criticized as a means for legislators to fund sometimes-unnecessary pet projects in their districts, earmarks are the mechanism for how many geographically specific projects get funded, from the reconstruction of the Interstate 35W Bridge to what could have been a new rescue boat for the Minnesota River Valley.

"This means that there is going to be a tremendous amount of unmet community need," Bill Harper, chief of staff for Rep. Betty McCollum, said about the moratorium. The St. Paul Democrat is

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Minnesota's only member of the Appropriations Committee.

The level of impact depends on the project. The Central Corridor for example, which sought \$45 million in 2011 earmark funding, may go on uninterrupted due to its inclusion as a priority in Obama's budget proposal, but other projects will certainly take hits, according to spokespeople for various projects that sought funding in the 2011 appropriations bill.

Despite not receiving \$750,000 in earmark dollars, the University of Minnesota's College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences is still managing to conduct research on the Emerald Ash Borer - the beetle threatening ash trees in forests across Minnesota - but on a smaller scale, according to Abel Ponce de Leon, associate dean for research at the school.

"You are impacted in the sense that you are not able to do a better job," Ponce de Leon said. The research is currently being funded through grant money and will advance as far as it can, he added, noting its importance to the Ash tree population. Minnesota has the second largest concentration of the tree in the country.

"In the event the Ash borer is extremely successful and destroys all the Ash trees then at some point someone can go back and replant those trees," he said. "It's a simple idea, but it's an idea that demands a lot of labor and with that a lot of funding."

About \$17 million of the total earmark requests submitted for the east metro would have gone to fund research at the University of Minnesota. Another large chunk, about \$30 million, would have helped the Minnesota National Guard, which requested federal funding for a slew of projects, including its Yellow Ribbon Program, which provides support to service members and their families before, during and after deployment.

"A cutback in directed funding will negatively impact our capabilities, from taking care of families during deployment to improving our readiness to respond to domestic emergencies," Minnesota Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Kevin Olsen said in a statement.

For projects like the construction of a new therapy pool at Gillette's Children's Hospital in St. Paul, or the rescue boat requested by Eagan to better equip the Minnesota River Valley for water emergencies, the impact is more cut and dry. They just won't happen, or at least not right now.

Gillette's included room for the pool in its new outpatient clinic because of the successes water therapy has proven to have on children with physical disabilities, but that's as far as the project has gone without money to pay for it, said Molly Snyder, hospital spokeswoman.

"Right now it's just an empty space," she said. The hospital is now exploring other funding options that could replace the \$600,000 it requested in earmark dollars.

"What those are at this point I don't know," Snyder said.

For other projects, the impact is less dire.

The Northstar Rail's Phase 2 project, which hopes to extend the rail to St. Cloud, had been after \$25 million in 2011 earmark funding, according to Felix Schmiesing, chair of the Phase 2 project and a member of the Northstar Corridor Development Authority's executive board. Since the project has stalled, though, it isn't a big deal to miss out on the federal funds, he said.

"Right now we need to continue to work on increasing our ridership and we don't need to spend a lot of money to do that, so we're okay with this pause," Schmiesing said.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation, which stood to receive millions in earmark funding, does not expect to be hampered by the moratorium, according to Abby McKenzie, director of MnDOT's office of capital programs and performance measures.

McKenzie explained that the lack of earmarks means more money in a Federal Highway Administration pool that gets divided through a formula across the country. Earmark projects, which she said MnDOT itself doesn't request, often shift the attention of the department off projects it has deemed more important to those that gleaned federal dollars.

For many of the other Minnesota projects, the impact of the earmark ban could hinge on how deep Congress cuts spending. Without the legislative process in place to allocate funds to specific projects, federal departments will make the decision about how to distribute resources, Harper said, and those pools of money could shrink through the budget process.

"All the pots of money could get smaller and in some cases... be eliminated," Harper said. "In totality, what this means, is a total level of uncertainty."

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LOST FUNDING

The roughly 128 east metro projects for which earmarks had been requested totaled about \$240 million. With the Congressional ban on federally directed funding in effect, none will receive earmark dollars. A sampling of the projects include:

\$203,618 for an HVAC system for the Jewish Community Center in St. Paul

\$2 million for research on bovine tuberculosis for the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine

\$45 million for the Central Corridor Light Rail Transit System

\$4 million for analysis and design of a right-of way acquisition along I-94 for Washington County

\$900,000 to equip UH-60 Medevac helicopters with infrared sensing technology for the Minnesota National Guard

\$375,000 for equipment for tactical law enforcement teams for St. Paul

To see the entire list of requests, visit the websites of local representatives

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar: klobuchar.senate.gov/ethics.cfm

U.S. Sen. Al Franken: franken.senate.gov/?p=appropriations_requests_2011

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum:
www.mccollum.house.gov/index.php?option=com_contentview=articleid=823Itemid=111

U.S. Rep. Michelle Bachman as well as U.S. Rep. John Kline did not submit requests for 2011 earmarks.